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EARTHQUAKES IN MUGHAL INDIA

Enayatullah Khan

The Indian subcontinent has a history of devastating earthquakes from the beginning because India lies at the north-western end of the Indo-Australian Plate. The chief tectonic sub-regions of India responsible for earthquakes is the disturbance created by the rift between the Eurasian and the Indo-Australian plates, along with the pressures of the older mountain ranges of Central India and the Peninsula.¹

The author of *Tarikh-i Hasan* informs us that an earthquake was noticed in Srinagar on 24th September 1501 AD, in which a large number of people lost their lives and houses were razed to ground. It is also said that tremors were felt for a period of three months.²

Babur in his account of Kabul, under the year 1505 mentioned a severe earthquake in which most of the ramparts of the walls and houses fell down; houses were levelled to the ground in towns and villages and many persons lay dead beneath them. Every house fell in the village of Paghman (northwest Kabul) and 70-80 household lay dead under their walls. It was observed that the tremors occurred 33 times on the first day and for a month afterwards used to quake two or three times in 24 hours.³ Though the epicentre of the earthquake was apparently at Kabul, it also affected northern India.⁴ Most of the medieval sources recorded about the earthquake of 1505 which affected Agra. This earthquake was too recorded in Hindi novel of the 16th century which deals with the period of Man Singh Tomar⁵ by Vrindavan Lal Verma known as *Mrignayani*, in which he narrates about earthquake which devastated Gwalior, Mandu and other areas.⁶ Due to its high intensity, it was felt from Afghanistan to some portion of India.

Babur also informs us that in 1519, in the lower part of dale (julgā) of Chandawal, a violent earthquake occurred which continued for nearly half an hour.⁷

An earthquake of Kashmir in 1554 was devastating. The river Veshav (near Kulgam) changed its course. The tremors continued for several days.⁸ Francois Bernier too mentions this earthquake. Many villages and towns were destroyed. It is estimated that about six hundred people lost their lives.⁹

In 1618, on 16th May an earthquake accompanied by severe hurricane at Bombay.¹⁰ Because of this natural disaster, about 2000 persons lost their lives and 60 vessels were destroyed at Bombay.¹¹ In 1623, the earthquake occurred at Calicut, and due to low intensity, no loss was recorded.¹²

The Diary of President Methwold informs us that on August 29th, 1636 a tremor was felt at Surat. People claimed that it was the first earthquake of

which they were sensible.¹³ It was probably high intensity which thrown down the entire houses in the affected areas.¹⁴ The Deccani source *Basatin-us Salatin*¹⁵ informs us that in 1653-54 a severe tremor occurred but it was low intensity so, no loss was recorded.¹⁶ According to modern geologist T. Oldham, the earthquake of 1664 was a high intensity and tremors were felt for about a month at intervals. He also informs us about the earthquake which occurred in 1665 on the bank of the Ganges.¹⁷ In 1667 the English received a report regarding the earthquake which was felt at Qasim Bazar on 22nd August 1667.¹⁸ On 3rd May 1668, intelligence report arrived from Thatta that an earthquake had destroyed the town of Samaji, in which due to high intensity about thirty thousand houses collapsed.¹⁹ The author of *Maasir-i Alamgiri*, informs us that in 1669, on 03rd June strong tremor was felt in Kashmir but houses were not damaged. After a gap of few days, it occurred again noticed and a pit of 30 yards formed in the area.²⁰ *Mirat-i Alam* too informs us an earthquake which occurred on 04th June 1669 at Garh Mandaran (comprising part of Bardawan, Vishnupur and Bankura) and due to heavy intensity of the quake, there appeared a crack on earth.²¹

In 1680, Kashmir witnessed an earthquake which affected the area of about 130,000 square miles. According to Bernier, about 20,000 houses, 30,000 cattle-heads and 3,000 human-beings were destroyed.²² In 1684, a severe earthquake again affected Kashmir.²³ Thus, the frequent visitation of earthquake in Kashmir forced people to build their houses of light timber.

Manucci says of the same earthquake that 30,000 houses were destroyed and a heavy loss of human beings, moreover, those who survived were no better than the dead were.²⁴ Manucci also informs us that an earthquake was felt at Gujarat on 04th January 1699.²⁵ The earthquake was quite devastating and due to the earthquake, canals became almost dry and the element of sulphur increased in the water.²⁶

In February 1705, an earthquake again occurred in the province of Gujarat. It was so severe that there was rift in the ground extending over a length of five leagues in some places: the fissures were ten to twenty cubits wide, and some of them were as board as thirty cubits.²⁷

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⁵ Ruler of Gwalior from 1486-1516.

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